

## SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ISSUES IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S *A FINE BALANCE*

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### ABSTRACT

Rohinton Mistry is an Indian born writer of Parsi descent, living in Canada since 1975. He is among the few contemporaries who have written from his place of migration about India, its political scenario, regional identities, subalterns, history, cultural pluralism, gender among others. This paper deals with the social and political issues in his second and most famous novel, *A Fine Balance* published in the year 1995. Rohinton Mistry's Indo-nostalgic novels, deal with the dark and grim side of life. *A Fine Balance* set in 1975 against the back drop of Bombay (Now Mumbai) vividly explores the State of Emergency between 1975 and 1977 as well as the hideous and adverse effect it had on the common man.

**KEYWORDS:** Emergency, Post-Independence, Subaltern, Common Man, Beautification, Sterilisation

### INTRODUCTION

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, is set in 1975 in an unnamed city, which can easily be identified as Bombay. This is the very same year that Mistry moved to Canada and in India the political scenario was at its worst as the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi declared a State of Emergency. Unlike in his first novel, *Such A Long Journey*, in *A Fine Balance*, he dwells beyond the parsi world to talk about the criminalisation of politics. The monumental epic scale novel deals with every aspect of human experience and Indian life; its people, climate, cities, ethnicities, classes, regional identities. He focuses on the three broad issues of gender, class and power oppression. The novel was shortlisted for Booker Prize in 1996 and won the Second Annual Giller Prize in 1995, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction in 1996 and was also selected for Oprah's Book Club.

*A Fine Balance* opens with a chapter called Prologue 1975 and ends with Epilogue 1984 and through its 700 pages paints the nuances of human experience in the most exciting and absorbing manner which is also pessimistic and sordid. Mistry as a chronicler has cleverly interfaced history and fiction to bring out the socio-political events that took place during Mrs. Indira Gandhi's State of Emergency, a period of corruption, tyranny, exploitation, oppression, violence and bloodshed. Emergency was a blow to the already limited capacities and options of having a better future for the common man.

Mistry's fictions are embedded in the political background of the post-independent India. Though politics is the subtext to the main action of Mistry's novels; *Such A Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matters*, he takes utmost care in not allowing politics to dominate the art of storytelling. There are two ways to read politics in Mistry; first, in the sense of the state and the national politics and second, in the terms of cultural politics which focuses on the role of the individual within the family, the community and the nation. (Dewnarain, 64)

In his novels, Rohinton Mistry depicted the Indian Socio-economic and political life as well as the Parsi Zoroastrian life, customs, beliefs and religion with complete authenticity and mastery. His characters develop gradually

widening into the social, cultural and political world. His novels have a leisurely pace without ever losing the reader's interest and attention. The characters change and develop subtly and totally engross the reader.

## **HISTORY FICTION INTERFACE**

India became independent in 1947 but an amicable solution in electing a power to rule was not feasible. Violence erupted between Hindus and Muslims resulting in the partition of India into India and Pakistan. Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan moved to India while Muslims moved to Pakistan. Jawaharlal Nehru became the first elected Prime Minister of independent India followed by Lal Bahadur Shastri. In 1972, Mrs. Indira Gandhi became the Prime Minister of India through a landslide victory which the Socialist Party alleged as complete electoral malpractice. In 1975, the Allahabad High Court announced a landmark verdict that ruled

Mrs. Indira Gandhi of electoral malpractice which meant she would have to leave the Prime Ministership and also remain out of politics for the next six years. On 25<sup>th</sup> June 1975 as per Mrs. Indira Gandhi's instruction the then President declared a State of Emergency resulting in total chaos and oppression. Mrs. Indira Gandhi became the unannounced dictator. Arresting political foes, curbing media freedom as well as introducing the sinister twenty point programme that included beautification and sterilization brought out by her so called heir apparent Sanjay Gandhi resulted in rootlessness and identity crisis.

Political misjudgment of the people resulted in Mrs. Indira Gandhi calling for general elections in the year 1977. She was defeated. Again in 1984, Mrs. Indira Gandhi was elected back to Prime Ministership and during this tenure; she was assassinated by her own Sikh bodyguards who revenged her for her grotesque military attack on the Sikh Holy Shrine, the Golden Temple in Amritsar that killed more than 400 Sikhs. Besides the abusive measures during the Emergency, Mrs. Indira Gandhi also increased the use of military force in the nation and she fostered a culture of nepotism (Campu, 49). These historical facts are much needed to understand Mistry's *A Fine Balance*. In the novel, we find the Hindu Muslim conflict taking unimaginable proportions. "Communal slaughter at the brand new border ignited riots every where, and sporting a fez in a Hindu neighborhood was as fatal as possessing a foreskin in a Muslim one. In certain areas it was wiser to go bareheaded, for choosing incorrectly among the fez, white cap and turban could mean losing one's head." (Mistry, 87)

The Parsis who thrived during the colonization, suffered. Farokh Kohlah, is a Parsi who lived in the foothills of the Himalaya. He lost huge plots of land and brooded over the departure of the colonizers. "Maneck's family had been wealthy....he (Farokh Kohlah, Maneck's father) tended it well and making it increase and multiply for the wife he was to marry and the son who would be born...there was another gorier parturition, when two nations incarnated out of one. A foreigner drew a magic line on a map and called it a new border; it became a river of blood upon earth" (Mistry, 205) Dina Dalal of the upper middle class family too felt the consequences of partition. She is forced to obey her brother Nuswaan's strict and rather abusive rules. "But a few days later, riots started in the city, Dina was struck at home with Nuswaan...when the curfew was lifted, Dina flew off to school, happy as an uncaged bird, eager for her eight hours of Nuswaanless existence. (Mistry, 25)

## **STATE OF EMERGENCY**

The first discussion begins when Ishvar asks, "Dinabai, what is this Emergency we hear about?" "Government problems – games played by people in power. It doesn't affect ordinary people like us." (Mistry, 75). But the irony is that Emergency intrudes only into the lives of ordinary people. Emergency has an overpowering presence in the novel. It was

studded with forced sterilizations, city embellishment programmes, media censorship as well as imprisonment of anyone through MISA (Maintenance of Internal Security Act). *A Fine Balance* concentrates on the terror and trauma that the ordinary common man experienced. Unlike *Such A Long Journey*, this novel embraces the world of the low caste Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. *A Fine Balance* depicts the struggle of the four main protagonists beyond the plethora of numerous other socio-economically challenged characters.

The fate of the marginalized and the dispossessed who find themselves at the mercy of the Brahminical and pseudo-secular elites shaping India is explored through the traumatic experience of the chamaars-turned-tailors, Ishvar and Omprakash. Dukhi, the father of Ishvar and Narayan sends them to be apprenticed as tailors under his friend, Ashraf –a Muslim tailor. Dukhi's daring to divert his sons to a different job becomes the talk of the town and he in turn earns the wrath of the so called chaste Hindus. "indeed was courageous, considering that the prime of his own life has been spent in obedient compliance with the traditions of caste system. Like his forefathers before him, he had accepted from childhood the occupation preordained for his present incarnation." (Mistry, 109). Through the healthy relationship between Dukhi and Ashraf and the unhealthy bondage between the subaltern chamaars represented by Dukhi and the high caste chaste Hindu, Thakur Dharamsi, Mistry drives home the fact that "ideal human relationship should be above all the concept of caste, creed and colour." (Kumar.19) When Narayan returned to the village to cast his vote, Thakur Dharamsi, the Zamindar felt infuriated. Thakur's men beat Narayan and his friends to death and in due course the entire family was burnt alive. The subalterns succumb to the arrogance of Thakur Dharamsi who strongly believed that crossing the line of caste was a serious offence and that such people should be stringently punished. Even police donot file an F.I.R calling Ishvar and Om, "filthy achoot castes" (Mistry, 172)

The adverse effect of Emergency was experienced by Ishvar and Om who fell prey to almost all the aspects of Emergency and were reduced to beggary. During Emergency, in the name of beautification people were left, immobile and rootless. The slogan, "The Nation is on the move." (Mistry, 303) seemed quite ironical because instead of advancement and prosperity all the characters experienced destruction and identity crisis. The process of beautification introduced slum clearance and sterilization. People were forcefully evicted from the hamlets they lived in and moved to work camps where the living conditions were almost unbearable and deplorable.

Ishvar and Om were quite forcibly taken to one such work camp where they are forced to undergo sterilization. In the aftermath, Ishvar develops infection and one of his legs is amputated, making it impossible for him to practice tailoring and earn his livelihood. Om who is a youth in his prime waiting to be married is also sterilized under the orders of the village Zamindar, Thakur Dharamsi. The needless arrogance of the upper class to maintain social supremacy led to the consolidation and Emergence of the Dalit consciousness in the Indian politics. Despite the new laws regarding untouchability, exploitation of the lower castes by the upper castes continue. Through Thakur Dharamsi, Mistry reveals the silenced histories and suppressed voices in centuries of violence and domination characterized by the Indian political and caste system. Mistry emphasizes the fact it is too difficult to fight against the deep-rooted caste system in India.

After the death of her husband Rustom Dalal, Dina Dalal tried to live a descent and independent life through her tailoring business. She hired Ishvar and Om to work for her and also partially rented her apartment to Maneck Kohlah who stayed there as a paying guest. Because of Ishvar and Om's disability, Dina is forced to close her sewing business. Bankruptcy forced Dina to undergo the worst she feared, she lost her independence and was forced to live with her brother, Nusswan, who treated her like a maid.

Globalization intruded into the foothills of Himalaya leading to ecological and economical imbalance.

“ Maneck’s very loss is a loss for the Indian middle class, whose morality, hopes and desires he embodies”(Biyani, 5) Before his suicide maneck learns about the death of his only friend Avinash who is tortured to death by the police for his anti-Emergency and anti- Indira speeches. Emergency ensured that the common man was stripped of civil liberties and fundamental rights. The police had become an ally in the Government’s depressing record of human rights abuse. (Biyani, 6). Avinash was the only hope to his family, his death resulted in the suicide of his three sisters who saved their father, a retired government employee from financial hardship of giving dowry to get his three daughters’ married. The dreams of Ishavar, Om, Dina and Maneck are thwarted by external agencies and political changes. The Parsis and the other minorities underwent inhuman attacks on their identity and physical self leaving them numb and paralyzed. The atmosphere is far more pessimistic and there is little hope for the individual to effectively and positively carve out a personal destiny in the face of political revenge, violence and caste-class divide.

Despite all the hue and cry in the Indian political system about federalism and democracy, the lower middle-class and the poor are always at the receiving end of power politics and economic domination, leaving them victims of oppression and neglect. To the subaltern, “Living each day is to face one emergency or another”. (Mistry, 571) The economically upper class people did not understand the sufferings of the poor, to them the Prime Minister was a “visionary leader” and the Emergency “ A true spirit of Renaissance” (Mistry, 371). Mrs. Gupta, the proprietor of AuRevoir Exports and Nusswan, Dina Dalal’s brother, echo the capitalist attitude. Mrs. Gupta flourished during the State of Emergency paying low wages to employees as there was no fear of union leaders and strikes.

## CONCLUSIONS

Mistry assimilates national politics with the main plot of his narrative which is the fate of the subaltern and the minority in the pre and post independent era. A Fine Balance provides a scathing indictment on the power of the elite and the moneyed in which the marginalized and the powerless had no role to play. Most of the marginalized succumbed to the pressure; Avinash is brutally murdered, Maneck committed suicide, Ishvar and Om are forced to undergo sterilization which left them deformed and destituted, Dina lost her much needed independence and self respect. The society presented by Mistry is not an idealized society. Superstition and violence are rampant. Gender inequalities are visible in the fact that sweetmeats were circulated when a male child is born, but no celebration attended the birth of a girl. It is also the site of the repetition of caste-based brutality. The lower castes are beaten to, tortured and killed for trivial reasons. The minorities in India do not look for scaling the skies or economic up gradation but for equality, justice, satisfactory basic needs and coexistence because, “ In the end, it’s all a question of balance.”(Mistry, 22)

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